

## AA Traditions

The Traditions module is, as are all subjects in this syllabary, a presentation of a single position on the meaning and application of the Traditions. As such subjective material requires, the reader may except or reject such portions as he or she feels is appropriate for their intended use.

There are few things that prove true of alcoholics, but it can be said that they do not like being told what to do.

The Traditions were not an attempt to tell AAs what to do, or even set the standard for AA groups. The Traditions were a result of errors made in groups and by individuals that resulted in the loss of early groups, and the loss of an unknown number of alcoholics who were driven away by those mistakes.

When the meetings were limited to the original two, Akron, OH and New York, the problems addressed by the two primary founders and their fellowships was frequently discussed between the groups before any alcoholics were made to create a formal standard.

The original meetings changed. They originally required a medical detox and working the equivalent of the first six steps before attending meetings. When that standard was dropped, the fellowship continued to grow.

The need for a personal connection to someone in the Oxford Group was never a

formal requirement, but it was the only entry for the first two groups. Clarence Snyder's group, which was unaffiliated with the Oxford Group, eliminated that requirement.

The membership limitation to upper class, white males was never formal, but the reality was that these people first gathered to use this process to get and remain sober.

The Traditions began as a series of articles published in *The Grapevine*, the AA 'meeting-in-print,' during the first decade or so of AA meetings, first within the Oxford Group and later as an independent entity. Bill Wilson, the author of those articles, drew heavily from the volume of correspondence maintained with groups around the world and individuals involved in the sudden growth of the AA Program.

After the *Saturday Evening Post* article in 1941, the membership exploded from a few hundred to several thousand, guided by the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. In that explosion, groups began to raise the number of qualifications for membership, which kept people away, alcoholics who otherwise could have stayed to hear the message, and could have worked the Steps to stay sober.

It should be argued that these new requirements were not to assure "the right kind of alcoholic" but a result of fear – personal fears and cultural fears of their time.

The lack of understanding of a healthy fellowship led to a number of impressive blunders in meeting-building. One meeting in the 1940s served beer at their meetings. The meeting quickly vanished and a new AA group did not form for several years. Even in recent news, an AA group was accused of the systematic sexual abuse that they touted as being part of the program.

Clearly, such acts are not part of the AA program, but the newcomer has no way of knowing this.

To this day, there are groups who do not subscribe to the Traditions and the Traditions are not required for form an AA meetings.

The purpose of this discussion is to explore the intent and application of the principles contained in the Traditions.

The Twelve Traditions are copyright by the central office for Alcoholics Anonymous. This article is based on the “Long Form” of each Tradition.

#### TAKEN FROM THE LONG FORM

“Our AA experience has taught us that: “

### First Tradition

- 1.) *Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. AA must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.*

Without the fellowship, it is complex variety and expanse; we are lost in our individual struggle and the drama of alcoholism. Together we are given the opportunity to find sobriety and to build a new life.

The fellowship continues to be a resource for us as we face new situations in the new life, and where we meet the newcomers to whom we “give it away.” It is the “giving it away”

that makes room for our next lesson and next revelation.

Regardless of personal opinion, regardless of our rise of self-righteousness, our sudden intolerance for those who are different from us (or who are *exactly* like us), it is observed a common religious concept of “willing submission” to the need of the fellowship to continue.

This almost never means sacrificing what we know to be true, but exercising the “restraint of tongue and pen” that tends to divide our fellowship into factions, hurt feelings, or drive wedges between those who would otherwise be part of our sobriety.

We may never learn to like everyone in the meeting. There will be people you meet in meetings that will test your ability to accept to its limit. But we are required to love them as expressions of our new trust in a Higher Power and our level of acceptance.

Traditions provide a common frame in which we see our Group, our Service Structure, and our shared need to keep our program available to ourselves and to those who come behind us.

### Second Tradition

- 2.) *For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience.*

Related to the First Tradition, the Second has us put our authority into the combined personal Higher Power expressed through the members of the Group and the Fellowship, and not in the loudest voice, the strongest passion, or the entrenched authority of a deluded Bleeding Deacon.

There is a desire to make that trust in our Higher Power about *other people's* refusing to submit to group conscience, or drive to get others to see the *right* way. But that direction

is for use to keep *our* hands off the results of the Group Conscience – it is about *our* restraint of tongue and pen.

Groups can become ill, as can individuals. The group that does not correct its behavior may cease to exist. The group that changes according to whim, fashion, or some passing concept of political correctness may also risk ceasing to exist.

Group Inventory is suggested by World Service to keep each Group active as a reflection of its membership and the need that group serves.

### **Third Tradition**

*3.) Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought AA membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA Group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.*

The Third Tradition was the most protective of all AA's service legacies. The single requirement of having the desire to stop drinking does not exclude desire for recovery from other problems, but identifies the qualification of that individual for the very reason the AA group is gathered.

This means you may be an alcoholic, AND an addict, AND a compulsive gambler, AND an over-eater, AND a sexual compulsive, AND any number of other problems. Many of these problems are addressed with other 12-Step programs where the membership share those specific problems, but a “singleness of purpose” in inclusive.

But the requirement to be in an AA meeting is the desire to stop drinking. Beyond that, it is about their willingness to perform the work outlined in the Twelve Steps to find and maintain sobriety.

The Big Book is often misunderstood as saying that ONLY an alcoholic can be in the meetings. *A member is not even required to identify as anything*, other than by local custom. The only question of identity is whether or not you identify with the reason for this AA meetings existence; to carry the message to the suffering alcoholic who still suffers, and that you satisfy only requirement for membership - to have the desire to stop drinking.

Any additional qualification is an outside issue for the group, but may be vital to your own Recovery process.

—❖— Application for Membership —❖—

**ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS**

*Having read the twelve steps and having taken Step No. 1,  
I apply for membership in the Montreal Group of Alcoholics  
Anonymous.*

*When admitted to membership it will be my desire to co-  
operate with the group as fully as possible and not to harm  
it, interfere with its work or impede its progress in any way.*

Therefore:

1. I agree not to attend any meeting on a day on which I have taken anything whatsoever to drink of an alcoholic nature.
2. In the interests of complete honesty, if I do any drinking whatsoever at any time, I will make the fact known to my sponsor, or in his absence, to some other senior member of the group, and will not attempt to deliberately hide such drinking from the group.
3. Further, in the event that I continue drinking intermittently while ostensibly a member of this group, I agree to relinquish my membership if asked to do so by the group through my sponsor or the group secretary.
4. Understanding that although the aims and objects of A.A. are well known, names and affairs of the group are definitely secret, I agree not to divulge names of members to outsiders or to discuss private affairs of the group with non-members.
5. I undertake to introduce new members to the group only after they have fulfilled whatever qualifications for membership the group may from time to time require.
6. I undertake to familiarize myself with the duties and obligations of a sponsor and when called upon to sponsor an applicant will make every effort to see that he becomes a good member.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Applicant*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Sponsor*

Application for Membership

In an effort to enforce their own vision of AA, some early groups wrote official letters of expulsion from the fellowship, as shown in this example:

December 5, 1941

From the Executive Committee of the Los  
Angeles Group of Alcoholics Anonymous

Dear Mrs. Irma Lavone,

At a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Los Angeles Group of Alcoholics Anonymous held December 4, 1941, it was decided that your attendance at group meetings was no longer desired until certain explanations and plans for the future were made to the satisfaction of this Committee. This action has been taken for reasons which should be most apparent to yourself.

It was decided that, should you so desire, you may appear before members of this Committee and state your attitude. This opportunity may be afforded you between now and December 15, 1941.

You may communicate with us at the above address by that date. In case you do not wish to appear, we shall consider the matter closed and that your membership is terminated.

Source: Wally P.

## Fourth Tradition

4.) *With respect to its own affairs, each AA group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience. But when its plans concern the welfare of neighboring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted. And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect AA as a whole without conferring with the Trustees of the*

*General Service Board. On such issues our common welfare is paramount.*

Independence of the individual groups has been hailed as a march of immature anarchy, but the truth has been new meeting formats have evolved to suit the needs of particular fellowships. A group that creates conditions or a format that others find unacceptable will either

a) prove their value as they find support,

b) fade away as the new meeting succeeds or fails, according to its value to its local community.

Throughout the country, people open meetings with different readings, or with no readings. They announce their name and that they are alcoholic, or make no identification at all. They have book readings, speaker meetings, writing meetings, discussion-only meetings (men only, women only, gay only, lawyer only, teacher only), and special meetings put on as classes or workshops for the local fellowship.

Every group has someone move into their area from another region where things are done differently, who tries to make people “do it right!”

Every meeting is free to form and format as it sees fit, provided it does not affect another group or the overall structure of AA. This means it is a courtesy for a meeting starting on a night where another meeting already exists let that group know of its intent so the first meeting is acknowledged. But neither group can claim any authority to approve or disapprove the other meeting.

Meetings are free to change the readings from AA, but cannot claim that their revised materials represent AA as a whole – it is simply not true. But such changes may serve their Group’s needs in recovery.

In many respects, relationships between Groups are entirely optional and usually considered an “Outside Issue” as explained in the Tenth Tradition. That Group A passes the 7th Tradition at the beginning of the meeting, and Group B passes the 7th Tradition basket at the end of the meeting, is not the concern of the other meeting.

## **Fifth Tradition**

*5.) Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose—that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.*

Groups become entrenched in their own glory, particularly when members have remained sober for many years. There is a real danger that members of a group may set themselves up as the judges of all things good for local and international AA.

It is never the purpose of an AA group to prove their superiority or ranking over other groups. The Fifth Tradition keeps the focus on the ability of the group, by whatever composition or format, to serve the alcoholic who still suffers.

“The alcoholic who still suffers” do not mean newcomers, although newcomers are usually in the most identifiable distress. Members with long term sobriety face new problems in life and may need the combined experience, strength, and hope of their group to face the new problem. Someone with a few months may blossom with new fears that had been kept asleep by drunkenness and now need their group to get them into the next Step or the next exercise of Principles.

The newcomer is always the first thought with this Tradition. Does the Group carry the message of recovery to that newcomer? Is the meeting set up and open at the time promised? Is there a personal ‘hello’ for the new man or woman walking or rolling through the door for the first time?

Are they confident that the newcomer will find that meeting there the next time?

Some Groups further carry the message to treatment centers, hospitals, or the homes or hospital rooms of alcoholics who cannot attend. Such outreach is up to the Group Conscious, as expressed in Tradition Four.

## Sixth Tradition

6.) *Problems of money, property, and authority may easily divert us from our primary spiritual aim. We think, therefore, that any considerable property of genuine use to AA should be separately incorporated and managed, thus dividing the material from the spiritual. An AA group, as such, should never go into business. Secondary aids to AA, such as clubs or hospitals which require much property or administration, ought to be incorporated and so set apart that, if necessary, they can be freely discarded by the groups. Hence such facilities ought not to use the AA name. Their management should be the sole responsibility of those people who financially support them. For clubs, AA managers are usually preferred. But hospitals, as well as other places of recuperation, ought to be well outside AA-and medically supervised. While an AA group may cooperate with anyone, such cooperation ought never go so far as affiliation or endorsement, actual or implied. An AA group can bind itself to no one.*

Alcoholics are notorious for being power-grabbing egotists. The purpose of the Sixth Tradition is to avoid the perils of position, notoriety, or other benefits from association with an outside group.

Linked directly to the non-affiliation of Tradition Eight, the Sixth Tradition prevents the threats of money, property, or prestige that have caused other public benefit concerns to vanish over the years.

We are not an organization in the traditional sense. We have a policy of cooperation with outside organizations that must never take the form of an “endorsement” by name, material, funds, or public statements to or from such outside groups. The name AA should not be linked in any public or business sense with any outside organization, no

matter how attractive or beneficial it may seem at the moment.

AA has learned to function on a principle known to Native Americans for many years – “It must be good for seven generations.” This means what seems beneficial or attractive at the moment may become a liability that will cause unity of the fellowship to suffer, and may cause groups or areas to lose their ability to serve the alcoholics who still suffer.

## Seventh Tradition

7.) *The AA groups themselves ought to be fully supported by the voluntary contributions of their own members. We think that each group should soon achieve this ideal; that any public solicitation of funds using the name of Alcoholics Anonymous is highly dangerous, whether by groups, clubs, hospitals, or other outside agencies; that acceptance of large gifts from any source, or of contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise. Then too, we view with much concern those AA treasuries which continue, beyond prudent reserves, to accumulate funds for no stated AA purpose. Experience has often warned us that nothing can so surely destroy our spiritual heritage as futile disputes over property, money, and authority.*

Accepting money from outside organizations opens the door to have to conform to the donor’s requirements to get the next donation. While many sources may claim non-involvement and a lack of requirements for the money, it creates an open door for a donor who has made such a contribution to dictate that only certain people, a certain class of person, a certain race, a certain religious group, political affiliation, or class, be reached with the contributor’s money.

Independence from outside support, to be self-supporting, is required for the adult responsibility of any individual attempting to achieve a mature, healthy sobriety. The

collection of alcoholics in their search for this same kind of healthy responsibility can only benefit from the same responsibility for their group's financial health.

## **Eighth Tradition**

*8.) Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional. We define professionalism as the occupation of counseling alcoholics for fees or hire. But we may employ alcoholics where they are going to perform those services for which we may otherwise have to engage non-alcoholics. Such special services may be well recompensed. But our usual AA "12th Step" work is never to be paid for.*

When AA grew from a few hundred people to several thousand in the weeks after the appearance of the Saturday Evening Post article by Jack Alexander, it became clear that someone had to answer the mail, answer the phones, and perform the unglamorous work of responding.

As with other changes in AA, it was a huge controversy as to whether someone being paid for secretarial work was performing a Twelfth Step job, which should never be subject to a paycheck.

Bill Wilson explains the principle of responsible services in his chapter on the Eighth Tradition in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, but confirmed that no one should ever be paid for 12th Step Work. But it was also a violation of the Seventh Tradition to expect someone to do non-12th Step work for free.

"Our own contributions" slowly began to mean paying for the phone bill for an AA phone, the box rent for an AA mailing address, or (when local meetings need a physical location for local services) rent for a reasonable local office.

Speakers for AA are not to be paid for their talk, but it is reasonable to provide for transportation costs and, when needed, a local sleeping spot. If the speaker travelled to that city, the gas, rail, or airfare would still apply. If the local community cannot host the speaker in a member's home, it may be appropriate for the local group to provide a motel room.

Despite the spiritual nature of the Program, it is not appropriate to suddenly expect loggers to cut down trees to make paper for AA literature as a free service to the Fellowship, nor can we expect buildings to be built with contributed electricity for local meetings.

The Eight Tradition protects from the same big-shotism that is the focus of Tradition Six, while acknowledging the real financial costs of providing our services.

## **Ninth Tradition**

*9.) Each AA group needs the least possible organization. Rotating leadership is the best. The small group may elect its Secretary, the large group its Rotating Committee, and the groups of a large Metropolitan area their Central or Intergroup Committee, which often employs a full-time Secretary. The trustees of the General Service Board are, in effect, our AA General Service Committee. They are the custodians of our AA Tradition and the receivers of voluntary AA contributions by which we maintain our AA General Service Office at New York. They are authorized by the groups to handle our over-all public relations and they guarantee the integrity of our principle newspaper, "The AA Grapevine." All such representatives are to be guided in the spirit of service, for true leaders in AA are but trusted and experienced servants of the whole. They derive no real authority from their titles; they do not govern. Universal respect is the key to their usefulness.*



Many AA groups have a regular Home Group meeting where group issues are decided, but some have chosen to create a committee to conduct the group's business. The decision to handle operational issues this way is up to the Group.

But such a committee is not vested with permanent authority. The Group needs to be able to create, or dissolve, such service bodies, as needed.

A few groups in an area may want to host a Round-Up, a Conference, or an Assembly, and create a committee to carry out their issues and do the work. They may even vote to continue the committee from year to year, as needed. Such committees need to reflect the groups they service in an open, accessible, and democratic manner.

Groups in an area may choose to create an Intergroup with representatives from member groups to carry out services for the local fellowships. As I write, a local intergroup provides a depository where groups can go to buy books, literature, current meeting guides (which the intergroup edits and publishes), and outside items like bumper stickers, anniversary chips, posters, and other items the Intergroup has approved for sale. Like individual meetings, service boards are not the authority of groups outside their service area and need not be approved by anyone other than the groups they serve.

It should also be said that opinions on the right and wrong way to carry out services abound, and anyone on the losing side of a vote is free to express their opinion and displeasure.

But the Second Tradition remains our authority, *as expressed in the group conscience*. Dissenting opinions are invited and may win a later vote.

## Tenth Tradition

*10.) No AA group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate AA, express any opinion on outside controversial issues-particularly those of politics, alcohol reform, or sectarian religion. The Alcoholics Anonymous groups oppose no one. Concerning such matters they can express no views whatever.*

An earlier fellowship, the Washingtonian Temperance Society failed to find the common focus we have for groups and, as a result, competed with each other for members, took public positions on public issues, took both sides of public arguments in very public disagreements, and managed to be lost to history because of massive disunity.

Alcoholics Anonymous does not have opinions on public issues. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous have *lots* of opinions and will frequently express them at the top of their lungs, sometimes even in meetings.

As a Fellowship, in the name of Unity (First Tradition), Service (Twelfth Step, Fifth Tradition), and Recovery (the sum goal of all of the Steps and Traditions), we remove outside issues from our interior discussions.

Alcoholics Anonymous has no position on political issues. *Members* have lots of opinions on public issues.

Alcoholics Anonymous has no position on religious issues. *Members* have lots of opinions on religious issues.

Alcoholics Anonymous has no position on social issues or private therapies. *Members* have lots of opinions on social issues and private therapies.

We want the newcomer to find a meeting that is united on Recovery, not divided by politics, religion, controversy, or a self-righteousness that prevents the members from carrying the message.

AA must protect its primary purpose (Fifth Tradition) by keeping the meetings open and inviting to the newcomer. None of us want to be responsible for the newcomer leaving his or her first meeting feeling unwelcome because there was an argument over an outside issue, particularly if it makes them believe they are on the wrong side of the issue for AA. Outside issues can include politics, religion, substances other than alcohol, behaviors, or psychological theories.

Having no opinion prevents AA from being on the right side or the wrong side of outside issues. Members always have the freedom to discuss such issues among themselves and outside the framework of the Meeting.

### **Eleventh Tradition**

*11.) Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think AA ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as AA members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed. Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us.*

Anonymity of the membership does not mean no one ever knows about AA. The neighbors knew you were drunk; they probably noticed you aren't drunk now. They may suspect why. Your family probably knows what you are doing. You may have an abundance of gratitude for the Program and AA.

But this does not give permission to make public pronouncements on behalf of AA, hoping to get others into AA, or to build up the membership of any group.

Avoiding promotion and campaigning for membership means the responsibility for the attraction of AA remains with the result of the group's actions (the Steps and Recovery) and not clever campaigns or slogans. This

does not mean you will not see public service announcements on television, or hear them on the radio. Those services let people know that AA exists and is available if they want to seek out help.

Non-promotion does not eliminate a policy of "cooperation with the professional community." This means that the local service boards can provide information to requests from groups of educational, religious, medical, legal, or public service groups. It also means a phone number is available in most AA communities for more information about local AA meetings.

### **Twelfth Tradition**

*12.) And finally, we of Alcoholics*

*Anonymous believe that the principle of Anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice a genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him who presides over us all.*

Anonymity was originally intended to protect members from the public stigma of alcoholism, but proved to be a powerful tool that allowed newcomers to enter the program, even if they do not give their right name when they enter the doors. Anonymity was seen as a way to take away the markers of social position, legal standing, or background. They became "an alcoholic in Recovery," rather than Name / Occupation / Address / Bank Balance / Connections who is an alcoholic.

In the early years, local and national celebrities achieved sobriety and revealed their membership in AA, only to get drunk again to give the message "AA didn't work for XX, so it probably won't work for you..." The most notable case was Rolle H., a national

baseball star who achieved highly publicized sobriety, and drank again.

Anonymity became a defense for the alcoholic to clear away distractions to achieve sobriety

and to protect the fellowship from the actions of a single person to taint the public perception of that person representing AA.